



# **Desperate Times**

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*This short story consists of 5 parts  
presented in a non-linear sequence.*

## Part 4 of 5

Sidney had been walking for ages. *An hour? Three?* He'd lost all sense of time, stumbling through the darkness. The only hint of the hours that had passed was the dim, orange light, beginning to creep over the horizon.

The soles of his shoes had melted through, adding to his limp. A paste of soot and blood smeared his face. He looked like a creature from hell. And if such was the case, his environment was fitting.

Ash carpeted the ground, as far as the eye could see, like freshly fallen snow. Thousands of pine trees stood their place, like soldiers loyal unto death. Red heat still glowing from their cores, through cracks and holes in their trunks. Leaves and bark scorched away. Charred, smoking skeletons. The firefly-like embers had left the air by now, and in their place hung a heavy smoke-like fog.

The freezing winter air sunk down from the twilight sky, pressing eagerly to reach the earth, but the heat stubbornly held it's place. Small dust devils swept by periodically, spewing up soot and ash, as the two extremes fought to claim the area.

The long night was beginning to catch up to him. He stumbled onward aimlessly, leaving dragged footsteps in his wake. His chest throbbing with unbearable pain. *They have to be near*, he kept telling himself. He had heard them while he sheltered in the cave for the night. But finding them now that the fire had passed, was proving difficult.

He started crawling on all fours, up a steep embankment—save for the arm which he clutched around his chest. The first rays of light had pierced through the darkness by now. He could see it glowing from the top of the hill, a stairway to heaven. The light urged him onwards. For every three steps gained, he slid two steps back, but he pushed on and made it to the top. The sunlight caressed his face, as he crested the hill, for the first time in what felt like an eternity.

He was on the edge of a plateau. The fire had no impartiality and had ravaged this stretch of forest all the same. But what gave Sidney hope was the sight at the far end of the plateau. Vaguely visible through the fog. The very thing he

had been searching for. He jogged ungainly across the burnt plain. Ash swirling past his face. *I've finally escaped.* Tears of joy left lines across his dirty face. But the closer he got to his goal, the faster that same hope fled. He came to a stop and stared despondently at the fire truck.

It sat in the ash, paint scorched from its body. Tyres melted down to the rims. It was at the base of a sandstone cliff, and Sidney could see why the truck had been left to the mercy of the flames. There was only one way for it to have escaped, that was on a dirt road leading across the plateau—which just a few hours ago would have been engulfed in flames. The firefighters had surely been caught off guard between the cliff face and the forest fire. Sidney was grateful, however, staring inside the melted cabin, that the firefighters seemed to have escaped on foot.

He climbed inside the truck, rummaging through piles of ash and deformed plastic. Looking for anything that could be of use. Anything that might have survived the inferno. But everything was destroyed beyond recognition. The windshield had shattered in the heat, and a chilly breeze came flowing into the cabin. He looked up in that moment, and in the distance, saw the figure of a man walking across the plateau.

Sidney cursed and jumped out, landing on his side in the dirt. He ground his teeth in pain. The stranger was walking in his direction, but still far off. Sidney crawled under the fire truck and stood up on the other side. Putting the truck between him and the stranger's line of sight. *Was that him?* He couldn't be sure, but dared not take a chance.

He'd be spotted if he ran out from behind the truck. Instead, he climbed up a ladder which was welded to the side of the truck's water tank. On top he spotted a round hatch leading inside. He opened it and dropped into the tank without a second thought.

## Part 2 of 5

The cold air lay over Sidney's back, heavy like a wet blanket. It trickled through him and into the earth, washing his heat out with it the longer he lay prone. Sidney had been on his belly, on the outskirts of the camp, for the last few hours. He had watched the logs in the fire shrink and crumble until a bed of coals remained. Only for the hunter to get up from his chair and add more logs.

*Will he never sleep?* Sidney thought to himself. The hunter had only stood up two times since the sun had set. Firstly to feed his dog and now refueling the fire. For all the time between those events, the hunter sat silently, staring into the flames. Little fiery fingers dancing in his grey eyes. Hunting rifle across his lap.

He was a big man, tall and broad. Built like a lumberjack. Arms thick as trunks. Although his hair was graying from age, Sidney was sure the man could pick him up by his ankles if he so pleased. His menacing bullmastiff lay by his side, tied to a large pine tree. The dog was sleeping, after enjoying the large steak his owner had given him.

Sidney was beginning to doubt his decision to spy on the hunter. He lay under a thick bush, close enough for him to keep an eye on the man, but far enough that his dog wouldn't notice him. At least it hadn't so far.

The pickup truck was his focus. If the burly man would just go to sleep, Sidney could sneak into camp and drive off with it. And if the man didn't sleep, then Sidney would wait for him to go out hunting in the morning. He would go out on foot, Sidney was sure of that. But waiting proved difficult. He couldn't help thinking of all the possibilities that could get him caught, and each passing second added to the list, to the anxiety.

"Alright Diesel, I'm gonna take a dump. Look after the camp while I'm gone." The dog gave a curious glance towards his owner as he disappeared into the woods with a bundle of toilet paper, before resting its head back on the ground. Silence again, save for the crackling of the fire. Sidney's mounting anxiety got the best of him and before he knew it he was up on his feet stalking his way towards the hunter's massive truck. *It's now or never.*

Pine needles squished softly under his hiking shoes. The truck was parked a fair distance from the fire and shielded him from the dog's view. He peered in through the driver's window, upon reaching it. No keys in the ignition. He had seen Vernor leaving them in there earlier the afternoon, he must have removed them while Sidney was out in the woods. He tested the truck's door, locked.

*What to do now?* The keys might be on Vernor's person. Sidney had the element of surprise on his side. He could attack the man unawares, while he was doing his business in the dark. But Diesel would bark up a storm if he inched any closer to the camp. Another possibility was that the keys were in the hunter's camping tent. And the tent, fortunately, faced away from the camp. The door half unzipped. If Sidney was careful enough, he could surely search inside. He peeked over the truck. Diesel still lay in place, eyes closed. The new logs already starting to burn out. *He'll be back soon. No time to waste.*

He crouched low and made his way towards the small tent. His heartbeat thudding inside. *Could the dog hear his heart?* Each step brought him closer to the tent, and the dog. He raised the tent flap gingerly and peered inside. A sleeping bag and pillow were all that lay on the floor.

The burning logs fell in on themselves, spewing a wave of embers into the air. Momentarily lighting up the dark campsite. Sidney peaked over the tent and saw Diesel standing, staring back into his eyes. Still as a cannon before its fuse burned out.

His heart skipped a beat. He dropped to his haunches, out of site of the do— a rifle shot cracked through the silence. A bullet whizzed through the tent, over Sidney's head. He fell over on his back, and was up again in an instant, scrambling for the truck. He looked behind and saw the dog sprinting at him. Covering three strides for every step that he got closer to the truck. The hunter stood in front of the fire, staring eerily, silhouetted against the flames. Rifle hanging in one hand.

The dog's monstrous barking got louder with each passing heartbeat. Sidney reached the truck, placed his foot on the rear tyre and leapt up over the tailgate. Legs still dangling over the edge, he pulled them in, narrowly missing jaws chomping at where his feet were. The dog was jumping up wildly against the side of the truck. It was just too high for the beast to get in.

He noticed a small sliding window that connected the back of the pickup to the inside. He crawled over to it and managed to pry it open with his fingers. In the reflection he saw the stranger running down towards him. Sidney squeezed through, landed in the back seat and climbed frantically into the driver's chair.

With a loud smash, shards of glass sprayed across Sidney's face, as the hunter broke the window with the butt of his rifle. The man shot his thick hairy arm through and grabbed Sidney around the throat. He tried screaming; not even a wheeze came out. The man squeezed harder, Sidney felt the pressure building in his head like a pimple ready to burst. Stars flooded his vision. Sidney reached at the hunting knife which hung on his side, and gave one hard slash outside the window.

The vice grip released from his throat. Blood came rushing back into his skull as well as sprayed across his face. The latter wasn't his. Without looking at the state of the hunter, Sidney dropped the handbrake and slid the gear lever to Neutral. The truck began moving. Slowly at first, then faster like a snowball down a hill. He tried switching on the lights, but it was useless without the keys. Trees and bush began whizzing by as the long gravel road became steeper. The truck continued flying straight and true. Sidney was just barely able to make out the road in the moonlight filtering through the pine trees. A bend in the road came up quickly. He urged the steering wheel to the right with all his might, until he heard a click and the steering refused to turn further.

He realised the folly of his decision in that moment. Without the keys, the steering lock had activated. And then he was weightless, like an astronaut in his shuttle. Glass shards floated around him mid-air, reflecting the moonlight like hundreds of little stars. All was silent, save for the air rushing past the broken window.

The impact hit like a train. No dramatic barrel rolls, just a sudden stop into the side of a tree. Sidney flew into the dashboard, and felt a sickening crunch in his chest.

The world stood still again. Silent, save for the shell-shocked ringing in his ears. He remained sprawled over the dashboard. A smell of smoke and diesel wafting into his nostrils. Slowly, the ringing disappeared. The whistle of the wind dancing through tree branches became clearer. The sound of fluid,

pitter-pattering against steel under the truck's hood. A stream of blood, sliding down his brow.

After the world refocused, he forced himself up and slid gingerly out of the truck. Clutching his arm around his chest. The truck was bent and crumpled into a disgusting shape. One of its wheels was still spinning, unaware that the truck was no longer moving. Before he left, he spotted a hiking bag that had slid out from under the seat. He slipped it over his shoulder and made off into the dark. Deeper into the forest.

## Part 3 of 5

Vernor drank two mouthfuls of whiskey and emptied the remainder of the bottle over his face. The alcohol seeped into the deep cut, searing. Only to be flushed away by the blood pumping out of it. The cut ran down from the bridge of his nose to the corner of his lip. If he hadn't reacted in time, he would have been missing an eye.

Diesel stood next to him, panting, restless after not catching the thief. *Should have opened the door and let Diesel have his way*, Vernor thought to himself. *That would have given the boy what he deserved*. He had little sympathy for the unruly youth of this generation, let alone a thief who attacked him and stole his truck.

He finished wrapping the last of the bandage around his head, slung the rifle strap over his shoulder and started down the road which the thief had driven. Flashlight in hand and Diesel by his side. *That little bastard will pay for this. He messed with the wrong man*.

Vernor found a bend in the road where the truck had carried on straight over the edge. The pickup lay at the bottom of a steep hill, having left a trail of broken branches and vegetation in its wake. Diesel sprinted down the hill and in to the truck, through the driver's door which hung open. Vernor slid down the scree and inspected the interior, rifle ready.

The truck was a wreck, but no sign of the thief. The knife which had wounded Vernor lay on the floor of the truck. He picked it up, and gave the blade to Diesel. The dog had been trained in tracking, and was gifted to Vernor by his past girlfriend. The dog ended up more loyal than his partner, and became his go-to companion for his hunting trips.

"Go find him boy!" Vernor shouted, after Diesel got a few good sniffs of the knife's handle. The bullmastiff leapt out and disappeared into the woods, nose sweeping over the floor like a metal detector. Vernor followed at a jog.

He hiked down sheer valleys and over steep hills, pausing whenever Diesel doubled back on his tracks, narrowing in on the scent of his quarry. The temperature had dropped significantly since the attack. And what at first was a light sprinkle of snow, had become heavier. The ground in the circle of the flashlight began losing its brown, muddy colour. Slowly being replaced with

white. Vernor wondered if Diesel would manage to follow the scent through the snow.

The dog froze and gave a loud bark. Staring into the distance. Vernor switched of his light, and saw the glow of a camp fire emanating from beyond. A valley cutting between him and the glow. "Good boy Diesel." He whispered, petting the beast.

He took Diesel's leash from his coat, and tied him to a tree. This called for stealth. He couldn't afford the dog giving away his location. He started down the slope, into the valley. In the belly of the valley, he crossed a stream and made his way up the opposite slope. Stealthy as a cat. The type of silence only a seasoned hunter had. The anticipation fuelling his adrenaline.

He was nearing the crest from which the warm glow spewed over, but something felt off. The sound of wood burning. It was becoming too loud. He peered over the crest of the slope and a supernova of heat blasted his face, drying all perspiration from it in an instant. Snowfall melted mid-air as it blew over the crest. A fire the size of the forest scrambled through the woodland, leaping from tree to tree, racing through the shrubbery, straight for him. Like a rabid animal out for his blood.

He dashed back down the hill, across the stream and began up the side which Diesel stood. But he found the same menacing glow from the top of that hill. Embers were carrying through the wind like fireflies. The fire had jumped between the two hills. He ran back down to the stream, buying a few more minutes. With the flames spreading down both sides of the valley, it was just a matter of time until they claimed him in the valley's belly. There was no walking out. He was a prisoner confined to the closing wall of flames.

He stood in the ankle deep stream. He could feel the heat seeping deeper into his skin as the air warmed up. The the fire continued its inexorable creep down the valley, like a fat serpent slithering towards a cornered mouse. The stream was not deep enough to submerge himself in. So he dropped to his knees, frantically digging in the sand bank. Clawing away madly at pine needles, then dirt and pebbles as he got deeper. He dug a shallow trench leading from the river bank and disappearing into the stream. He removed his shirt, climbed inside the trench and began burying himself.

He wanted to be as close to the water as possible, but the stream was only deep enough to cover his legs. Burning branches and glowing pinecones

started falling around him. The fire had already caught the highest branches in the canopy above. It was descending down the trees like a hydraulic press.

He wrapped his shirt over his face and, with some manoeuvring, buried the last of the dirt over his head. There he lay, buried from his waist upwards, lower body submerged in the stream. He had either just dug his own grave or salvation. Time would tell.

The sounds of the scorching fire were muffled through the layer of dirt, but still frighteningly loud. The shirt prevented soil from falling in his nose, but his breathing came fast and labored. He felt the temperature of the ground gradually increasing. The hydraulic press had closed. The Icy stream running over his legs began losing its bite. The water turned lukewarm. Warmer now, warm as a bath. The dirt began scorching his skin, he was merely food for the earth, being mud-baked for the insatiable hunger of the forest.

The stream was boiling. The soil muffled his screams as the water cooked his legs, tightening his skin like leather. Hot air filled his lungs after each moan, so that he thought he would combust from the inside.

After an immeasurable period of torment, the water began cooling.

He waited until the stream turned icy and numbed his legs again—although he knew not whether it was the coolness or the damage which numbed them. He rose from the dirt, the walking dead. Fabric stuck to his skin as he peeled the shirt off. A devilish glow remained in the air, but the rampage had moved on. *Diesel!*

He hobbled as fast as he could, up to where he had tied the dog. Blisters tearing open across his face with each sudden move. Skin hanging loosely from his legs like torn denim.

Traces of the melted leash remained, wrapped around the pine tree. Diesel's collar had melted off and the dog was gone. Vernor searched the scene, frantically yelling the dog's name. Stumbling haphazardly through the smoke. Soon enough, he found what was left of Diesel, huddled against a large boulder. It was closer to the stream than Vernor expected. The dog had ran to his aid, despite the flames.

An animalistic scream left his soul.

He dropped to his knees. Tears and blister fluid rolling down his face.

*The the thief started the fire.*

*He killed Diesel.  
And for that, he will pay.*

## Part 1 of 5

Sidney sat in the camping chair. Boots off, socks steaming on his feet in front of the campfire. What a day it had been. It had taken them the better part of the afternoon to get here. There was no phone signal, no other humans. Just the two of them, and acre upon acre of woodland. He needed this.

His companion sat opposite the fire. Staring into the ends of time. He sure was a quiet fella, an odd one too. Sidney stared up at the night sky peaking through the forest canopy. "It doesn't get better than this, am I right? Just two bros, a good fire, beer and meat in the belly." He belched loudly, and laughed. "This is where we're meant to be," Sidney continued. "We were never supposed to pay taxes. Worry about getting a degree, to get a dead-end job, to get a house, to work yourself to death. Once upon a time, all the earth was like this... wild. But man cannot keep anything good. They always have to ruin."

His companion gave no response, save for coughing up phlegm and spitting to the side. Eyes not leaving the fire.

"We get out of sync with our primal DNA, the longer we marinate in society." Sidney continued, "That's what I say. And what happens when society takes it's toll on you? When you've avoided the outdoors for too long?" Sidney mimicked a gun with his fingers against his head. "Self destruction." He pulled the imaginary trigger.

The man's lips twitched under his moustache.

"That's why I make a point of visiting the woods at least once a month, you know what I mean? Say, Vernon, I never thanked you for taking me out."

For the first time, Vernor raised his eyes from the fire and stared at Sidney. "You know, it's not every day that you'd hear of some rando from Facebook, asking for a volunteer to take them hunting. So thanks for that. I always wanted to try it out." A gentle breeze began stirring in the branches above. Trees creaked from the depths of the forest. Vernor gave no response.

"Say, I would never have thought you had Facebook. An old huntsman like yourself. You seem more the type who prefers to avoid cellphones?" Sidney chuckled awkwardly at his own comment, even though he didn't find it that funny.

“You know, I always say the best stories are the ones that kicked off on the spur of the—”

“You ever kill an animal before?” Vernor interrupted.

“Well.. Uh..” This was the first question Vernor had handed him this entire evening. “I reversed over my sister’s poodle once. Not on purpose though.”

“Obviously.” Vernor said derisively. “You want to know the problem with society?” His face turned to a sneer. “Folks are too soft. This new generation, only focused on social media nonsense and which celebrities screwing who.” Sidney shifted in his seat.

“Society doesn’t have any backbone like what it had back in the day.” Vernor continued, “This bloody woman empowerment and Black Lives Matter nonsense.”

“They don’t?” Sidney asked.

“All lives matter!” Vernor stood up and threw more wood on the fire.

“Society’s the reason we got a black president too. Way to jeopardise a country.”

*Bastard*, Sidney thought to himself. He got to his feet, and excused himself, saying he needed the loo. Vernor was sitting where he left him, by the time he got back. Vernor couldn’t help notice the hunting knife which now hung on Sidney’s belt.

“Say, that’s a nice Ram 3500 you got there. How much do you reckon it’s worth?”

Vernor raised an eyebrow, “More than you can afford.”

“Fair enough.” He raised his hands innocently. “That’s a 6.7 litre right? 420 horse power. It’s a fine machine.”

Vernor scoffed.

“So, do you take strangers out here often? Out in the woods?” Sidney asked.

“No, why would I do that? You’ll be the first and last.”

“I’m sure it get’s pretty lonely though right? With you living in that hunting store of yours. It’s a good ways outta town.”

“Suits me just fine.”

“Do you live alone there?” Vernor ignored the question.

“I’ve always wanted to test drive one of those 3500s you know.” Sidney continued, “But the dealership would never let me. Said I needed to pass a credit check before I could test it out.

“Maybe you should look at something cheaper.”

“Maybe.” Sidney shrugged his shoulders. Say, You think I could take yours on a quick test drive?”

Vernor scoffed again. “You must be mad, boy.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying. Might need to start my own business if I ever wanted to buy one of them Rams one day. How much would you say your store earns in a day?”

“You talk too much, boy.” Vernor spat in the fire. “Something you should know about me... I don’t like people. I don’t like talking to them. I don’t like associating with them. Let alone strangers.” He took a swig of whiskey from his hip flask and got to his feet. “And I sure as hell would never invite a boy like you on one of my hunting trips.”

“What do you mean?” Sidney asked. The wind began blowing harder. Vernor stood up and collected his rifle which leaned against a nearby tree. “Here’s what’s going to happen boy. You’re gonna get up from that seat of yours. And you’re gonna run your ass out of here. Best be running quick too, I plan on hunting in the morning.” He pet his dog on the head. “The old mutt’s a great tracker.”

Sidney’s heart was throbbing harder. “I don’t understand?”

Vernor scowled, shouldered his hunting rifle and pulled the trigger. The bullet zipped over Sidney’s head. He fell backwards over his chair.

“What’s there not to understand!” Vernor boomed like thunder. “You run as fast as you can!” He kicked Sidney over with his foot as he tried getting up. The dog was barking like mad in the background. “As far as you can!” He kicked Sidney over again. Dust flying in the air as he rolled. “I’m hunting you as soon as the sun rises and when I find you, I’m putting a bullet in your chest. Do you understand that?” He fired another shot into the air. Sidney scrambled to his feet and ran into the forest.

Tears streamed down his face as he ran through the dark. Branches whipped against him. Shrubs tried to trip him. He ran until he thought his body might die of exhaustion, before sliding onto his backside, behind a boulder. Chest heaving, lungs burning.

Once he’d calmed down enough, he tried figuring out what to do. Sunrise was still a long way off. He wanted to run, to put as much distance between him and the hunter as possible. But that’s what he’d be expecting. Even if he escaped Vernor, he was miles away from civilisation. If the hunter didn’t get

him, the elements would. There was only one option which Vernor wouldn't expect. One way to get out of here. He made his way back to the camp. Slow and cautious.

## Part 5 of 5

Sidney fell through the darkness, suspended in space for a split second, before landing with a splash on his back. The water was warm. He stood up, a stage light cast down upon him from the open hatch above. The rest of the water tank was dark as night. It was humid as a sauna in here and a smell like iced tea hung in the air. He began wading into the darkness, away from the entrance. The water only came up to his chest.

The sound of feet scraping on gravel came from outside, the footsteps were closer. He kept his eyes on the entrance as he moved backwards. He forgot to close the hatch, why didn't he close it? A hand reached around his leg from behind, beneath the water. He froze. The hand retreated as he stopped, and he heard something break the water surface behind his back. Nothing more after that, just silence. He took his eyes off the hatch, and dared turn around, slowly. A face was watching him, tilted to the side. Half of it peaked from the water, so that only one eye stared at him. His heart caught in his throat.

He spotted a second one of them, off to the side. This one was floating on it's back, staring at the ceiling. *These pour souls.* They were still in uniform. He held the first body gently by the arm and moved it to the side. It's flesh squished slightly under his fingers, like raw pastry. In the dim light, he could see that the skin was bleached white. And the body had lost all it's hair, like a chicken would lose it's feathers in a cooking pot. He held his hand to his mouth suppressing a sob. This wasn't supposed to happen. He thought a forest fire would bring the firefighters, they would rescue him. He didn't mean for anyone to get hurt.

He reached the back of the tank and faced the open hatch again. The hunter's head was poking through the hatch, staring inside. "Hello boy." The hunter dropped into the water.

The splash sent waves bouncing through the space. He disappeared beneath the surface. Then, like some cursed creature rising from the underworld, he slowly emerged. Standing up in the shaft of light. Half the hair of his head was burnt off, replaced with pink, wet, blistered skin, like that of a gold fish. The hair that remained, hung wet over his face, a devilish, bloody grin showing through his locks.

The hunter reached his hand up, displaying a large knife in the light. “How many times do you think I’ll need to stab you till you die?” He asked, reaching up with his free hand to the latch. He pulled the latch closed, and the stage drowned in darkness. “We’ll find out.”

Sidney was hyperventilating, holding his hands over his mouth, trying desperately not to make his breathing heard. But they came through in soft uncontrollable wheezes. The hunter said nothing, but the sound of water sloshing could be heard as he made his way to Sidney. It felt as if his eyes were hollowed out, he couldn’t see anything. He skirted to the side, and bumped into a body again. He grabbed it, wrapping his arms around it in a bear hug. Chest to chest. Its head hung limply over his shoulder and its skin felt pudgy against his face.

He began skirting along the wall of the tank, in the direction of the ceiling hatch. Step by step. Carrying the body along with him as a shield. Keeping the wall to his back. Then the body lifted its head, and whispered in Sidney’s ear, with a weak and anguished voice... “Help me.”

Sidney froze, almost dropping the man. “Found you boy.” The hunter sneered, inches from Sidney’s face. He pinned Sidney against the wall with his thick arm and began stabbing. The man Sidney had been holding as a shield, screeched in his ear. The wail of someone being killed a second time. Vernor continued stabbing ruthlessly, shouting with each thrust. “... Three, four, five....” Sidney wriggled out from between the body and the wall, ducking under water, kicking away frantically. He resurfaced on the opposite side of the tank, and reached up desperately for the hatch. Fumbling along the surface of the ceiling in the darkness. All the while, the hunter continued shouting behind him “... Sixteen, seventeen ...” The *poor soul’s* animalistic screams losing life.

His fingers brushed across the hatch, and he pushed upwards. Light poured back into the tank, burning his eyes. “What the?” Vernor shouted in surprise. Sidney jumped up, but his hands missed the edges of the hatch by inches. He jumped again, trying to climb out the ceiling. Behind him, Vernor charged through the water like a hippo. “I have you boy!” Sidney ducked beneath the surface, placed his feet on the floor and shot himself up again, arms reaching out. His fingers grabbed the edge of the hatch. Hanging now with his waist dangling in the water. The hunter’s charge getting closer.

He began pulling his exhausted body up. The pain in his chest flaring. Almost out of the tank. Only his feet still dangled in the water. Looking down, he saw the waves washing over them as the hunter was nearly upon him. He howled and pulled himself through with all his might, landing on his back, atop the tank. Panting.

The hunter's hand wrapped around the edges of the hatch. Sidney leapt to his feet and slammed it closed, standing on top of it. Vernor yelled in pain from inside the tank. Sidney stomped his feet on the hatch again and heard a sickening crunch, followed by another howl. He tore his belt off and tied it around the hatch's handle.

All was silent again from within the water tank.

The fiery landscape outside had died down, and snow had started to claim the Earth again. Sidney climbed down the tank's ladder. He placed a wet hand against the steel wall, out of breath. He gave it a knock, and curses came echoing back from within, followed by thuds against the wall.

He stumbled off.

Hand clutching his chest.

Following the worn out dirt road.